TRANSLATION

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The text below is an autobiographical narrative, with some name changes and minor adjustments to sequences of actual events, but it is also a way of addressing the effects of what Ato Quayson calls the global "process of postcolonializing." With Quayson's critical perspective in mind, the story is meant to complicate the jargon of "race, class, gender" (often reductive), and to suggest some of the ways, imaginative, personal, political, and communal, in which a variety of "others" attempt to translate America in an international context.

In *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process* Quayson develops an approach to textual analysis combined with agenda-setting work (Quayson 2000: 9), which he connects in what he calls the global *process of postcolonializing*. He distinguishes this process from the term "postcolonial" with its implicit assumption of a state of being after a period of colonial rule. Whereas the use of "postcolonial" theory to analyze texts and recent events in Native American culture has been criticized because many would argue that Native peoples of the Americas still live under colonial rule, Quayson's notion of process is less problematic.

Quayson highlights the term as a process of coming-into-being and of struggle *against* colonialism and its aftereffects (Quayson 2000: 9). He argues that colonial resistance cannot be seen as homogeneous across time. It also includes the process of revising collective memories and developing understandings of the multiple ways in which colonial power works. It includes the process of learning to encourage,

imaginatively as well as strategically, attitudes and actions that promote justice. In Quayson's view, what energizes the term is the desire among people throughout the world to perceive similar realities within seemingly different contexts, and the ability to recognize that colonialism is a central discourse and fact of the contemporary world (Quayson 2000: 10).

January 10, 1980. Grenoble, France.

Eric balances a baguette on a paper bag on his knee as he uses a plastic knife to smear it with *nutella* chocolate spread and a slice of Camembert cheese. Crumbs and a piece of cheese fall to the floor as he hands it to me, swaying to the rhythm of the moving train. I eat it hungrily. We sit across from each other in this six-person railway compartment with its two rows of facing, red leather seats decorated with framed black and white photographs of tourist destinations: Caen, Clerment-Ferrand, Bourdeaux, and Aix-En-Provence. I feel my eyelids heavy and am lulled by the steady rhythm of the train.

The sight of my brother composing this sandwich is a comfort after the eight-hour night flight from Kennedy Airport, where my skeptical parents drove me, after days of discussing whether or not I, at the age of twenty-two and still fresh out of college with little job experience or training, have enough money and sense for this extended excursion to Europe. I am determined to enroll in a four-month course in French language at the University of Grenoble's École des Langues et Littérature, and carry 800 dollars in travelers checks in my wallet. My parents and I had reached a compromise. My father typed up a statement and I signed on the black dotted line at the end. In the statement I promise to return home to Philadelphia immediately if my money runs out.

My brother hasn't heard any of this before, and he seems amused

as I tell him about it. I ask him, then, about the University of Lancaster in the north of England where he is an exchange student this year. Right now he is on his Christmas break and spending most of his time on overnight trains travelling through Holland, Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, and now France. He says that he can't wait to spend the next few days on solid ground in Grenoble rather than in a six-person railway compartment.

Eric talks on about his classes and girlfriend Stephanie. Then he tells a story about his friend Adrian who brewed three bottles of ale in his closet. The bottles exploded all over his clothes, and the smell permeated his room for weeks. However, the stories he most likes to tell are the ones about running though. Most all of his friends, including Adrian, run cross-country on the hills and miles of wooded paths around the university.

"You see this little gold ring?" he asks as he brushes away the hair that covers his right earlobe. I wonder what this has to do with running cross-country.

"It started out as a solidarity thing after the ale blew up," he says. "Adrian promised to pierce one ear if we would help him clean up the mess in his closet, and we felt so sorry for him that we all went out and pierced an ear. The best part, though, is that the earrings helped us win the Finals."

"Sure," I say, laughing.

"No, really" he says, "We all get up to the starting line and notice the guys on the other team staring at our ears. The gun goes off, and they are still staring at our ears. We are already out of sight, but they catch up. We win that race by a hair's breath just because of those gold rings in our ears."

"Come on, you can't be serious," I say, "Just because I'm all jet-

lagged you think I am going to fall for that."

"No, the earrings won us that race. I am absolutely sure."

"But you know," he adds, "I still go by my own best advice from my Abington High School track days. If you don't throw up your *nutella* baguette at the finishline, you haven't run a good race."

"Come on, that is *not* how it goes. You make a mess, and suddenly it turns out to be just the thing you always needed?"

My brother's words calm the static in my mind as I laugh about how he can go on about making a mess he planned all along, to the rhythm of this train as it speeds along miles of gardens, stone fences, fields of wheat, stone houses with red roofs, to a city near the Rhone in the Alps of southeastern France. When I arrive in Grenoble, I expect to find strong demitasse cups of espresso with sugar cubes, baguettes and chocolate, and classes at the university. What I don't know is if I will find a place to live or have enough money to last me even a month.

One day later we reach our destination, and I stand inside a red telephone booth on a Grenoble street corner. I deposit a gold coin into the slot and hear the voice of Mme. Fortainier of Number 14, Place Jean Moulin. I ask, in schoolbook American French, engaging shoulders, arms and every finger muscle in my effort, if she will rent me a room in her condominium. Closing the door to the booth minutes later, I exhale, relieved that Mme. Fortainier would like me to come to her place and meet her.

"You know, you use your hands when you talk in French," my brother says. He tells me how relieved he is that I speak some French and I think about how his trust that I know what I am doing is something that gives me an edge of self-trust I so desperately need right now. Eric seems sure that my gesturing into the air is part of my

style in the language, and I choose to believe him.

November 28, 2003. Tromsø, Norway.

It's Saturday night in my flat in Tromsø, Norway, the town where I now live and teach American literature and culture at a Norwegian university. My Swedish friend Kristin and English friend Marion are over for dinner and we talk of living as foreigners in Norway. We talk of indigenous Sami writers in Tromsø. We talk of Kristin's doctoral research project on power, discourse, and the law in seventeenth-century relationships between Sami people and the Swedish government. We talk about how the Sami found ways to make the Swedish law work for them, without the church and courts knowing about it. And we talk about power and the law in our time, too, in the Middle East. This subject feels urgent because Eric and his wife Adele are in Jerusalem now, trying to adopt a Palestinian baby from a Catholic orphanage.

"Most people think it is just crazy," I say. "'They kept getting letters from the orphanage about how difficult it would be, and then they got two rejection letters because they both are divorced. Finally the Catholic authorities said to come and meet them, although they may not even have a baby available for adoption. When I tell people here in Norway about it they shake their heads and say, 'THAT won´t be easy in the U.S. now.'" "My mother," I add, "She says to me on the phone the night before Eric and Adele flew to Tel Aviv that Eric is *so* excited about this trip. He says it is a once in a lifetime experience. My mom pauses then, and says of our sister who is a lawyer, 'Lynne helped him update his will. A very practical thing to do,' she says, 'updating your will. Everyone should do it.'"

I tell my friends that I guess she is just as scared as I am about Eric

and Adele's physical safety, and how hard it must be to admit that to me, since parents are supposed to tell their children not to be afraid. But she can't do anything about the outcome of this choice Eric has so consciously made. What I don't tell Kristin and Marion is that my own body feels like a breakable tangle of nerves and knots next to what I perceive as my brother's ability to act in spite of his possible fears. Nor do I tell Kristin and Marion that when people ask what the attraction of a Palestinian child is, I am not sure I have answers. I ask myself: Why choose one of the world's religious and political nerve centers to adopt from? After all, plenty of children from other parts of the world need homes too.

I had asked Eric about it, and he explained that his church supported a Catholic orphanage on the West Bank, that a Catholic priest visited the church, spoke and showed photographs of the children there, and in a single moment he recognized Anne and Matthew, his now teenaged daughter and son from his first marriage, in the images of the children on the screen. It started as simple as that. It became less simple in the year of negotiations that followed with offices in Washington D.C. and Israel. Conversations with members of Adele's and our family followed. I told him I thought he was braver than I would be, and that a friend of mine with Israeli friends advised staying far from public transportation, and staying with someone who knows where to go and where to avoid. But what did I know? I had only the mental image of a wide-eyed bewildered child trapped in the cross-fire of an adult grudge, but this child might be from the West Bank, Tel Aviv, Bogota, or Moscow. And I knew by now that any conversation about a child in the Middle East inevitably ends up in someone's politics.

My story, the one I tell my friends and the one I tell myself, is interrupted when the phone in my flat rings, and the voice on the line

is Eric calling from Jerusalem.

"I am not going to talk long," he says, "I have good news. You are going to be an aunt. I can't say much here because we don't know who may be listening. Just want to tell you that we are very safe. We have things cleared with the Catholic authorities at the national level and now just have to talk to the locals. It is very complicated and we don't know when we will be home. But we are very taken care of. There is a lot of waiting but, hey, that means we have a chance to see all the sights. Like the Church of the Nativity where we went yesterday. The only thing I haven't been doing is my running." He laughs. "Alright, I have to go now. I'll tell you all about it when we get home, maybe in a week, maybe two weeks."

I hang up the receiver and my eyes fix at the tangled chord at my feet. As my friends chat together in the living room my memory untangles to that image of my brother and me en route to Grenoble eating baguettes with chocolate spread, not knowing then, what unexpected complications I would meet in the south of France. I did manage to enroll in the language school, not knowing about the strikes to come at the university in the spring, where students and teachers would be caught in the political crossfire of a new law adopted by the national government that required foreign students to pass an advanced language exam before they could register for classes. The law, people feared, would mean many fewer students at the university and therefore less funding and fewer courses for French students, too. There would be tear gas bombs by local police, cancelled classes, and me caught in someone else's politics.

I would want to use this outer turmoil as a guise for my own inner fright about failing the exams. But in the end I wouldn't quit like I had such a burning desire to do, and would pass each exam and

leave Grenoble with a stamped yellow certificate to verify the result, if not the self-doubt that preceded it. Also not knowing that the Iran hostage crisis would develop not long after I would arrive in Grenoble, and that I would spend one whole Sunday afternoon in a one-bedroom flat together with two other Americans and ten Iranians, friends drinking espresso and eating pastries. All of us, it seemed, had been tossed together by chance and luck in the south of France, and I dreamed that the heat of caffeine, sugar, and stories could burn away all crossfires we humans create for ourselves and each other.

At this moment when he is in Jerusalem, I long to hold onto my brother's confidence, that if we wave our arms, and then throw up our line of pluck and chance to the world, the world will manage to translate our language and us, for anyone we meet, anywhere. Do I still want to risk speaking and acting with such open trust? Or has experience made me too aware of the difficulty of translation to take the risk of being misunderstood and then be left alone to face the consequences?

December 12, 2003. Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Jet-lagged from yesterday's twenty-four hour plane journey from Tromsø, I sit on a sofa in my friend Judy's duplex in Northeast Minneapolis. Judy and her husband Doug are out this evening, and I decide to phone Eric. He, Adele, and Nicole flew home from Tel Aviv to Washington D.C. the day before. It is three weeks since we last talked when I was in Tromsø and he in Jerusalem, and now he will tell me more than he could tell then:

"I am never going through the Tel Aviv airport again. Getting through the Israeli checkpoint was a miracle too," says Eric, "Nicole screamed for two hours before we got to the guards at the border but then she quieted when Adele covered her in a blanket. As soon as we

got through she started screaming again."

"From now on," says Eric, "I am a Palestinian." He isn't talking about suicide bombers, but about empathy with ordinary people who struggle to get to the market to buy bread, and who see their children leave for school in the morning not knowing if they will return safely in the evening. I know, too, that neither of us has lived the history of being a displaced person, from an Eastern European Jewish ghetto in the 1930s or from a Palestinian village on the West Bank in 1948. My emotions toss on the line of my own inability to translate the memory of someone else's collective past.

So the next day when Judy and I toss a green salad for dinner in her kitchen, I don't tell her that the adoption went through. Eric's passion is something I do not know how to translate. What I do know is that Judy is not a person to take sides or see anything in simple terms. She grew up in Jewish North Minneapolis and eloped to marry her first husband, a non-Jew, and then was welcomed home, married. Now, over forty years later, she has a daughter who is married to a Lakota-German man, and her twin grandsons were baptized in an Episcopal church on the reservation in southern Minnesota. "Being Jewish, I think I get a little closer to knowing what it is like to be Native American," she says about her daughter's daily life on the reservation.

I don't know how to tell Judy about the adoption because it is too close to events in Israel that she knows about already, and cannot influence. Likewise I don't think I know how to translate for Eric, being Jewish in Minneapolis or anywhere else.

June 6, 2004. Washington, D.C.

I fly to Washington D.C. from Tromsø for our parents's fiftieth

wedding anniversary dinner. I recognize I am back in America when I sleep in my nephew's bunkbed with its Washington Redskins bedspreads and a U.S. Marine Corps pillow. The next day we drive in a white Honda Accord to the FDR monument by the Potomac River and snap photographs of our parents with their four children, two daughter- in-laws, one son-in-law, and four grandchildren. We stand in front of a waterfall that cascades over a granite wall. Nicole, the youngest grandchild, wears a pink and red dress and wriggles and smiles as each of twelve cameras snap twelve times. Later we eat swordfish and steak, drink red wine, and enjoy vanilla custard for dessert at a posh wine and cheese bar in Georgetown. Adele feeds Nicole white crackers and red cherries, and then, for the rest of the evening carries her up and down the aisles, outside the restaurant and back inside to the dinner table.

"I'll have this routine down pat in another six months," Adele says, reminding us that this is her first child. Nicole walks now and is learning English words. She squeals in delight as she repeats the name of Eric's black labrador retriever. "Midnight. Midnight. MIDNIGHT." Over and over. To me, it sounds like a Norwegian "Midnatt". I smile in my secret knowledge that she is truly an international child. Midnight the dog ingests, digests, and wags his tail even after eating screws, batteries, and once, a whole box of acne medicine tablets. He spreads his tongue over Nicole's face and lets her put her fingers in his mouth. She laughs.

"You wouldn't believe how many people tell me how much my daughter looks like me," Eric says, "Nicole goes to day care in the morning," he continues, "The other kids start chanting 'Nikki, Nikki.' And do you know what she does?" he tells me, "She smiles at the other children and takes away their toys. But, I say, as long as they are

Jewish children I don't mind." He laughs, reminding me of the incident at the Tel Aviv airport where the police confiscated Nicole's rubber toy and her stroller.

"If somebody heard me say that and didn't have the context they might think I was anti-semitic. I don't feel that way at all. But Adele still hates it when I say that."

"So do I," I mutter under my breath, and I remember that I still somehow want to tell Judy about the adoption.

The next day Eric gives me a belated birthday present, a collection of oral histories called *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories* (Gorkin and Othman: 2000). Two authors edited the book: Rafiqa Othman, a Palestinian teacher in Jerusalem, and Michael Gorkin, an Israeli clinical psychologist who is Jewish. I think that I may have overreacted to his joke. Yes, we both are still trying to translate a world we now know differently, if not any better than we did in 1980 as we ate nutella, cheese, and baguettes on the southbound train to Grenoble.

August 27, 2004. Tromsø, Norway.

My brother and I face each other across the breakfast table with its red and white tablecloth, eating cornflakes and olive bread toast with orange marmelade. He is visiting me for four days with fourteen-year old Matthew and eighteen-year old Anne, children from his first marriage, while Adele and Nicole take their own trip to Florida. In Tromsø we will see seals in the museum, reindeer in the park, grass roofs of log cabins, take a bus trip through the Lyngen Alps north to Skjervøy, then ride the *Hurtigruta* Coastal Steamer back. We will shop for souvenirs and find a present for Peter, Eric's running friend from Lancaster who they'll visit in England after leaving Norway on Monday. Matthew is especially eager to visit the Tromsø War

Museum where we will see remains of the German Nazi ship *Tirpitz.* In 1944 British Allies sunk this ship off the island of Håkøy south of Tromsø.

Just then Eric notices a green leather-bound book on my bookshelf across from the table. It is about the nineteenth-century Indian Wars on the Plains and authored by our great-great-grandfather, Clement Lounsberry, a Civil War veteran. Matthew wants to hear about these wars, too, and Eric tells him Clement Lounsberry knew General George Armstrong Custer. He says Custer came to the door to tell our great-great grandfather he and the Calvary were going out to the Little Big Horn to kill some Indians. Did Clement want to come along?

"No," I say, "That is *not* the way it was." This time, unlike that time on the train heading to the south of France, Eric's words do not comfort. Instead I feel my face and hands grow hot. I talk back, imagining that I can load his ears with the rightness of my ideas about the broad-minded people I want to believe our family comes from. I remind him of what he has said ever since he and Adele returned from Tel Aviv, that Palestinians are like Native Americans. "And," I add, for an extra effect to feed my burning resentment about his anti-Jewish joke about Nicole's day care, "Judy says that being Jewish is not unlike being Native American."

"Well," Eric answers, "That *is* just the way *I* always heard the family story told." I don't ask whom he heard the story from but instead just tell him he is wrong. I'm not proud of how I feel myself slipping into the role of bossy know-it-all big sister, but I keep going because I don't know how to stop myself from thinking I know how to separate right from wrong: "Why don't you just read the words in the book to learn the real story?"

I open the binding of the 900 page *The Early History of North*

Dakota. We read from the Preface:

> I saw General Custer as he marched to his last battle—the massacre of Custer and 261 men of the Seventh United States Calvary on the Little Big Horn, by the Sioux. Accompanying him was Mark Kellogg, bearing my commission from the New York Herald, who rode the horse that was provided for me—for I had purposed going but could not—and who wore the belt I had worn in the Civil War, which was stained with my blood […] the Seventh United States Calvary, Custer's Regiment, was again baptized in blood at Wounded Knee, and the end was not reached until the tragic death of Sitting Bull, Dec. 15, 1890. (Lounsberry 1919: viii).

At this moment the words on the page do not translate to anything like what I remember reading by Clement Lounsberry. He was a man who I want to believe had friends on both sides of the conflict. And I, too, want to have friends on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I want to invent myself as a translator of cultures for my family and close friends, but I don't know how to do that because I am too tangled in my own words, too tangled in the past of my own Euroamerican ancestors.

These images of righteous sacrifice do not translate into anything close to the empathy for Native peoples I look for. In another book, I read a different version of the bigger story. *Bloodlines* is an autobiographical work of interconnected essays by Coeur d'Alene writer Janet Campbell Hale. In one essay Hale writes that her grandmother was one of many Nez Percé and a few Coeur d'Alene people who ran from Custer and his Seventh Calvary when the United States Army sought revenge after the Battle of Little Big Horn. Some of them survived the final confrontation between Chief Joseph's followers and Custer's regiment in the Little Bear Paw Mountains in Montana in 1877. Hale narrates, "Soldiers noted scarred trees where

hungry Indians had eaten bark and that they left behind a path marked by blood" (Hale 1993: 152).

It seems that neither Eric nor I can translate for each other, or for his son Matthew, what actually happened between General Custer and our great-great-grandfather. We cannot ever know if Clement Lounsberry thought about Custer's crimes against Janet Campbell Hale's grandmother and other Native peoples at the Little Big Horn, in the Bear Paw Mountains, and at Wounded Knee Creek.

What the four of us in my flat actually can know, or so we think, are the familiar stories about Eric's running, and its limits. Eric's heart is still in his running, and he means that literally. Just weeks before the trip to Norway he had been hospitalized, after months of lying in bed in the morning not able to hear a steady thump-thump. These days his heart goes thump, pause. Thumpthumpthump. He won't run any more marathons, although he will do a thirty minute run with Anne the following day. I recall that at the dinner table two days ago he had showed us a gold coin on a chain around his neck. It alerts the world that he uses a medication that prevents clots of blood from running to his brain and causing a stroke. To this news, Matthew and Anne had said nothing. They wanted answers. Unlike today, when told these tales just days earlier, I too had been quiet.

August 28, 2004. Tromsø, Norway.

Matthew asks:

"What is the most dangerous country in the world right now?"

"What is the government of Russia?"

"Why are we in Iraq if they don't want us there?"

Anne asks:

"Should I use the zoom or the wide angle lens this time?"

"Why do I have to get up now? I'm on vacation."

"Where is the hotel we'll stay at in London?"

"Near Marble Arch," Eric says. He finds answers to all their questions, and I decide to keep quiet.

Then Anne asks: "What happens if you don't get the medicine that prevents the strokes when you need it?"

Eric pauses. "That… would be a problem."

August 29, 2004. Tromsø, Norway.

Anne composes a salad at the table while I prepare baked salmon and potatos for the oven. I like that my niece and I are cooking together, and as I look at her salad in progress, my mind untangles to that scene of my brother and me in a train compartment in France twenty-four years ago…Eric handing me a baguette with *nutella* and cheese…crumbs falling to the floor…the plastic knife on a paper bag on his lap, balanced precariously. Here in my flat, Anne balances a knife on her lap as she adds ingredients: one head of iceberg lettuce, ten cherry tomatoes, nine carrots, twenty-five sunflower seeds, a handful of musli with raisins, oats, linseeds, and hazelnuts, two mushrooms and one ripe avocado, one nectarine and one kiwi, ten arugula leaves, three raw spinach leaves, fifty grams of goat cheese from a local north Norwegian farm, ten slices of reindeer sausage as topping, and three splashes of balsamic vinaigrette.

She cuts and slices, scrapes and tosses, and in her concentration bits of food fall to the left and right by her chair, onto the polished wood floor. The red and white tablecloth is crumpled in one corner. It hides bread and cheese crumbs and a few sunflower seeds. A knife clatters to the floor, and she reaches down to retrieve it. My brother looks toward the table from his seat on the sofa.

"When did you say we are eating?" he asks.

Anne glances my way, and I imagine the question she wants to ask: "Is it okay that I am making a mess of your floor and the tablecloth?"
In the space between her imagined question and my answer, the words of Stanley Kunitz in his poem "The Layers" flash through my mind: "Live in the layers, not in the litter."

In that momentary space, then, I see a speckled layer of balsamic vinigrette mixed with cheese crumbs on a red and white tablecloth in Tromsø,
I see a red telephone booth on a streetcorner in Grenoble,
I see an image of baptism in blood that haunts the pages of Clement Lounsberry's *Early History of North Dakota,*
I see the red of my brother's irregular heartbeat.
I see a white social worker, a priest, a nun at a Catholic orphanage anywhere, the paleness of a dark baby,
I see the Pale of illusions about white innocence and purity.
I see a white paper on which anything might be written.
I see the ordinary shape of the words as I open my mouth to speak:

"We're eating at seven o´clock."

And then to Anne: "Some people say that if you want to be a good cook, you have to make a good mess."

She lets go of the knife and looks me in the eye:

"Is it true?"

"It's up to you to decide," I say.

Our words hang, suspended in midair.

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